

VERMONT

Peer Support Program Improves Quality of Life for Vermont Cancer Survivors

One of the primary goals of the Vermont State Cancer Plan, released in 2005, is to “improve the quality of life for Vermonters living with, through and beyond a diagnosis of cancer.” The Vermont Cancer Survivor Network (VCSN), a volunteer not-for-profit organization, was founded in 2006 by cancer survivors, for cancer survivors, to identify and implement strategies to meet the State Cancer Plan’s survivorship goals.

To help define the necessary action steps, the Vermont Department of Health (VDH) commissioned a focus group study of cancer survivors from around the state to determine the needs of Vermont cancer survivors. Working with VCSN, the study was completed in the summer of 2006.

While focus group participants identified many needs, the predominant theme across all of the focus groups was that interpersonal support plays a critical role for cancer survivors, yet that need is not well met in many parts of the state. To quote one participant, “I was told that this would be hard, but no one told me how hard.”

Study participants described a deep need for the kind of personal support that can be provided only by someone who has been through a cancer experience. Fellow cancer survivors can provide an understanding ear and are identified frequently as the best source of information about what to expect from treatment and common side effects, available resources and programs, and helping to evaluate complex options. An extremely high value was placed on connecting with other cancer survivors to receive and provide support.

To address this need, VCSN developed its own peer-to-peer support program called Kindred Connections. Funding was received from VDH and community foundations to hire a contractor to develop a training program and recruit cancer survivor volunteers. The contractor reviewed training offered by other programs and worked with VCSN directors to take the best from each program to create their own

Kindred Connections training.

In 2007, the program was piloted in Washington and Orleans counties in Vermont. Both counties are rural and have limited access to cancer survivor support groups. To recruit survivor volunteers, posters were placed in medical and other area locations, and articles were published in local newspapers. VCSN partnered with a clinician in the oncology department at the hospitals serving each county to make referrals to the program.

The response to the call for volunteers was greater than expected, with 20 from one county and 12 from the other. The initial training was conducted by VCSN volunteers. After 1 year, during follow-up training, it became clear that more referrals were coming from volunteers than from hospitals. Trained volunteers felt empowered enough to offer informal support to family, friends, or neighbors affected by cancer. In 2008, VCSN altered the program to reduce the need for hospital referrals and to empower volunteers further to reach out to their own communities. By the end of 2008, more than 70 volunteers were trained in the two pilot counties, and dozens of “matches” with cancer survivors were made.

In 2009, working with University of Vermont researchers on a study funded by the National Cancer Institute, VCSN received a local grant from the Vermont Cancer Center to extend the program to a third rural county in Northwestern Vermont. An additional 20 volunteers have been trained.

The Kindred Connections peer support training program has demonstrated that it is a successful way to meet the complex needs of cancer survivors looking for support in rural Vermont communities. VCSN will continue to identify appropriate community partners to expand the program to other areas of Vermont.

One Vermont survivor put it this way: “I do feel the medical profession handles the physical parts of the disease very well, but there’s always all those other things.”

Contact

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🌐 http://healthvermont.gov/prevent/cancer/cancer_programs.aspx